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National service: the sixties meet the nineties

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National service: the sixties meet the nineties. (City Year service programs in Boston, Massachusetts) *Charles Derber.*

Brief Summary: City Year is a community service program in Boston, MA, envisioned to help empower citizens to solve their own problems in the area. The program's citizen participation component reincarnates an ideology upheld by the youth in the 1960s.

When I walked into the downtown office of Boston's City Year--the much-praised community service program, whose T-shirt President Clinton sports--memories of Mississippi Summer 1965 flashed through my mind. In a cavernous warehouse, with posters of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi plastered over the walls, scores of City Year kids are feverishly debating and caucusing, working the phones, stamping envelopes, and planning community events. The atmosphere is electric, and it is the most racially diverse group of young people I have seen in Boston. Like my fellow civil rights activists in Mississippi thirty years ago, City Year kids are fired up with passion and purpose, believing that they are changing Boston neighborhoods, and maybe about to change the world. Al From, one of Clinton's top domestic advisers, recently told City Year kids, "We want to know what you've done here to use it as a model across America."

But if service is the new youth movement of the 1990s, it's important to understand the true meaning of the notion of service. Is service a meaningful form of citizenship education, as City Year proclaims, and a strategy for "rebuilding our communities," as President Clinton recently wrote in the New York Times? Or is it, perhaps, another version of George Bush's "thousand points of light?" Is it charity, politics, social movement, or civic education? And are there ways to structure national service that will help make it, in the French social theorist Andre Gorz's classic formulation, a "radical reform" that can set in motion deep and progressive change?

City Year, founded in 1988 by Harvard Law graduates Michael Brown and Alan Khazei, sends its 225 recruits into Boston's neighborhoods to tutor in schools, clean up inner city parks and playgrounds, distribute food to AIDS patients, build and repair shelters for the homeless, help elderly people renovate their homes, and perform many other community projects. The young people, easily recognized by their red jackets and black caps with the City Year insignia, gather every morning for calisthenics and then fan out in teams to their projects, which last from three weeks to four months. The teams--bearing the names of Reebok, Bank of Boston, and other corporate sponsors--are the heart of City Year; racially diverse mini-communities of ten to twelve young people meet daily to plan and evaluate their projects and work through inter-personal differences and hassles. They also organize conferences and city-wide events such as the "serve-a-thon," which enlists corporations to donate workers for a day to paint schools, wash streets, and feed the hungry while raising money through pledges from friends and colleagues. City Year kids typically work for a

year and receive $100 a week, as well as a year-end $5,000 bonus. The program, funded privately, now also receives a $7 million federal grant as a National Service demonstration project.

It is tempting to characterize City Year service as a new incarnation of 1960s social activism. The "corps members," as they are called, have the same idealism that led me to Jackson, Mississippi, and City Year is revolutionizing their lives in ways that the civil rights movement changed mine. Leila, a corps member from affluent Brookline, told me that daily problem-solving with her incredibly diverse team in the inner city guaranteed, much as I had felt about my own Mississippi experience, that she would never again see the world through the narrow lens of the suburbs. Virgil, raised in the inner city by his blind Puerto Rican father, said that City Year had taught him that he could, like activists of the sixties, empower local communities and "inspire by example."

City Year is fostering a repudiation of the selfishness of the 1980s and a commitment to grass-roots direct action that has parallels to the participatory politics of the 1960s. But while it is committed to a rhetoric of empowerment, City Year, which studiously avoids even the whiff of partisan politics and is allergic to any notion of change through confrontation, has adopted a different vision of empowerment. When I asked one corps member whether he might help organize the public school students he tutors to protest the lack of books, he called such action "aggressive" and foreign to City Year's philosophy. Every corps member I interviewed told me that City Year rejects the tactic of confrontation, and the kind of protests that pit one part of the community against the other, or communities against the state or corporations. City Year's belief is that real change is more likely to happen through establishment of a common ground.

City Year is a form of pre-political civic activity. While it lacks the discourse and maturity of a fully developed citizenship enterprise, it is nevertheless an important corrective to the breakdown of community that characterizes America in the 1990s. It is part of the effort needed to rebuild the foundations of civil society that are antecedent and necessary to democratic politics. As the Eastern Europeans are now demonstrating by painful example, it is impossible to build or practice democracy until minimum levels of trust, solidarity, and commonality have been established.

Service, as exemplified in the City Year model, is a new social practice with two central elements: cultivation of a culture of caring and giving, rooted in a person-to-person helping relation that creatively melds individualism and community (for it nourishes self-development through doing for others); and mobilization of social action to foster the ties, resources, and common ground of communities. Service includes a major commitment to bridging and healing differences of race and class within and across communities, an area where City Year has excelled partly by the inspiration of the marvelously diverse community it has built among its participants. Service is more than charity, for it seeks to build the collectivity as well as the individual, but it is a weak, circumscribed form of social activism or civic politics, because service programs eschew all forms of "advocacy" or "partisanship," which mobilize the community for collective action in the larger public arena. Service nourishes the communitarian impulse in corps members and the communities they serve, but it does not, at least in its current form, inspire the understanding of social structure and political insights necessary for the economic and political tasks at hand.

With our civil society in disarray, the potential of service to help reshape our national

values and contribute to the rebuilding of communities should be enough to warrant our enthusiastic support. But progressives should strongly press for certain reforms that can address the limitations of the existing model, particularly those that turn service into a truncated form of civic activism and unnecessarily strip it of its potential for radical reform.

Service programs must reconceive and expand their concept of service education. City Year's greatest success is the personal growth and learning it has fostered among its corps members, a testimony to its democratic and participatory structure, its diversity, and the sensitivity of City Year staff to their young charges. But City Year has failed its corps members by not exposing them to the full range of civic education necessary to their mission. The poverty of analysis within the program of the economic and social forces creating inequality, powerlessness, and other community problems is startling. When I ask why Chelsea--a poor Boston neighborhood where City Year focuses its work--is so beset by problems, nobody responds in economic or political terms. I repeatedly draw a blank when I ask what kinds of redistribution of power and resources might be necessary to solve Chelsea's woes. The City Year kids do not seem to have ever considered whether without such changes, City Year's work might only be a Band-Aid, stanching the bleeding but not healing the underlying wound.

Political theorist Benjamin Barber, the guiding spirit behind the Rutgers University community service project that Clinton visited in March and chose as the site for the announcement of his national service proposal, has argued forcefully for rooting service in universities precisely to ensure this educational approach. But it is not necessary to link service to the classroom or any formal academic setting. There is no shortage of intellectual dialogue in City Year, for example: only a failure to open up the full range of social discourse and analysis that corps members need to understand to carry out their work and intellectually assimilate their daily experience. Service programs should offer workshops on the community's economic structure, social stratification, and political elites, encouraging corps members to think clearly about how such institutions contribute to the problems they are seeking to remedy.

A second reform concerns the criteria by which community projects are selected. If service projects are to fulfill their mission of strengthening communities, the nature of the community organizations they work with, and the prioritizing of projects they pick, is of extraordinary importance. It is politically safer for service projects such as City Year to choose non-controversial projects that are primarily directed to helping individuals, such as tutoring kids in after-school programs or serving in a soup kitchen. But service programs need to include in their repertoire a much broader array of projects, including locally based initiatives to create jobs, provide legal aid, or offer shelter for battered women. Such programs, which strengthen the community's capacity to help itself, are fully in the spirit of the service idea, and any controversy they generate will contribute to citizenship education, which cannot be divorced from civic controversy. Any project with strong grass-roots support and the potential to empower the community should be eligible; this will not "politicize" the service movement; rather, it will enable the service movement to succeed at its mission--helping communities meet the needs left unattended by both the market and the state.

As national service planners begin to flesh out their program guidelines, they should insist that funded programs:

* Enlist the participation of grass-roots community groups, including community

development corporations, in the selection of projects;

* Ensure that the projects demonstrably serve both individual and community-wide needs and are not disqualified on the grounds of being "partisan" or "advocacy-oriented;"

* Ensure corps members' active and democratic participation in the design, evaluation, and administration of service projects and the program as a whole;

* Establish recruitment policies that encourage race and class diversity reflective of the locality; and

* Introduce seminars and workshops covering a wide range of ideas and intellectual approaches to community and the political process.

These criteria will help ensure that even a fast-growing national service program will be democratic and participatory rather than hierarchical and bureaucratic, and that it fulfills the dual purposes of contributing to the growth and civic education of corps members while shoring up the foundations and self-reliance of our communities.

The danger to national service now is that deficit politics is eroding Clinton's commitment, paring his short-term program to a paltry 1,000 summer youth placements nationwide and creating a lethal gradualism in the program's build-up. In contrast to the moderate Democratic Leadership Conference's proposal for 800,000 placements, Clinton is now proposing merely 25,000 in the first year and 100,000 by 1997. Progressives should energetically press the administration to fund at least 100,000 in the first year and a half-million by the end of Clinton's first term. Even accepting the $10 billion annual cost figure for a 500,000-member national service program (which wildly inflates the net new costs and discounts the economic value of the service projects and potential savings in prison, police, or social welfare costs that might otherwise be expended on social service participants and their clients), service remains relatively economical, one-third the price tag of one squadron of Stealth bombers.

The White House Office of National Service reports that Clinton is "still in love with the program. It's his baby," but that the President feels it is important to go slow to "make sure it works"--and is under budgetary pressure. To help stiffen the President's resolve against the deficit hawks, send him postcards reminding him of his excitement at meeting City Year kids who define their American Dream in terms of giving back to the community--and who really mean it. Tell him it excites you too--and that his gradualist approach threatens the critical mass the program needs to capture the public's imagination and make a real impact on the nation's youth and communities. National service may still be Clinton's best hope to inspire a moral renaissance that takes us beyond the degraded individualism of the last decade. Mr. President, give your New Covenant and ours a chance.

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